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NIHIL SINE DEO IN FAR-RIGHT PROTESTS: CEREMONIAL REVOLUTIONS DURING ANTI-VACCINE PROTESTS IN ROMANIA

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This study investigates the far-right counter-hegemonic discourses employed in Romania during the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out and the promotion of green certificates. Using an array of traditional and occult symbols as well as religious iconography, the protests held by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) employed ritualistic ceremonies and espoused counter-hegemonic discourses that confronted the authorities' with the extreme religio-nationalist idea of "Romanianness".

Methodologically, this study combines digital ethnography of more than 30 protests in 2021–2022, with data collected from both social and conventional media as well as visual analysis of relevant discourses. The results show that the iconography of analysed protests can be interpreted as new rituals of rebellion against the authorities' decisions to restrict the movement of people. Likewise, AUR's on-the-ground discourse conveyed new counter-hegemonic that rejected neo-liberal ideals. Moreover, the analysis reveals that the performance styles used during the demonstrations show striking similarities with the January 6th Insurrection in the United States.

KEYWORDS*:* far-right, Romania, protests, Covid-19, counter-hegemony

INTRODUCTION

The spectre of far-right politics has haunted Eastern Europe (EE) since the European Union's (EU) enlargement that incorporated several ex-communist states into the Union. Lurking at the periphery of the political spectrum, far-right movements have waited for the advent of crises to engage with mainstream politics. The Covid-19 pandemic provided an ideal opportunity in EE's brittle political environment to do so. Although Covid-19 in EE has had generated many eyebrow-raising phenomena, the reaction to the pandemic by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) must count among the most stunning.

Historically, right-wing and far-right parties throughout EE managed to gain a political foothold before World War II and have succeeded to regain it especially after the fall of communism (Smrčková 2009; Mudde 2017; Hockenos 2013). In the process of

transitioning to democracy, Romania witnessed, before AUR, the rise of two radical parties: "Greater Romania Party" (PRM) and "People's Party – Dan Diaconescu" (PPDD). Both ran on a mix of nationalism, cultural isolationism, economic protectionism, strict conservatism, and xenophobic and homophobic postures that targeted minorities in Romania (Cinpoeş 2013; Pop-Eleches 2008; Gherghina and Miscoiu 2014; Gherghina and Soare 2013; Norocel 2010). Rhetorically, they promoted anti-European discourses through TV and party magazines (Norocel 2011).

Political cycles come and go, but some of the ideas cultivated by PRM and PPDD have been picked up by AUR, a movement turned into a far-right party after the 2018 failed referendum on redefining the family in the Romanian Constitution and amending same-sex marriages. Two years later, in the 2020 parliamentarian election, AUR exploited the dissatisfaction of a disgruntled electorate that became gradually aware of the state's consistent malfunctioning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The low turnout of 33.3% allowed the party to came in fourth with 9.1% of the vote. An analysis of the election results revealed that AUR's electorate is mostly young and under 35, with only 8% having a university education (Doiciar and Creţan 2021). The very good result of AUP among the diaspora was also a surprise. The diaspora had tended to vote for reformist and anti-corruption Romanian parties, such as "Save Romania Union" (USR), thus the 2020 results suggested that former USR voters switched allegiances to AUR. Undoubtedly, AUR gained notoriety due to its rhetoric and protests staged during the later stages of Covid-19 and the vaccine campaigns. In general, it shifted its position to far-right (Hopkins 2020).

To understand these changes, this paper takes a cue from Cas Mudde's definition of far-right parties (2019). He argues that the ideologies of far-right movements or parties have a nationalist core and offer an understanding of democracy that is different from the liberal consensus. Moreover, far-right groups rely on promoting nativism as a central component in national politics and do not shy away from promoting authoritarianism, as is amply illustrated by their use of violence during demonstrations whenever they are confronted by the media, political rivals or civil society. As is shown in various studies, AUR's rise was characterized by its unique forms of protest, colloquial language, and the use of violence (Doiciar and Creţan 2021). In this work I propose an analysis of this process relying on several anthropological tools.

The theoretical frame combines Max Gluckman's (1954) work on rituals of rebellion with Jan Kubik's (1994, 86–109) concept of ceremonial revolution, a specific adaptation of the Gramscian theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony (2011), and a definition of nationalism indebted to Bieber (2020a; 2020b). The empirical evidence comes from my analysis of 30 protests endorsed by AUR or its supporters on social media and demonstrates, in line with the existing literature, that AUR "develop[ed] counter-rhetoric that has linked pandemic measures with more profound themes such as fatherland, family and religiosity" (Doiciar and Creţan 2021, 244).

Methodologically, I analyse the intersection of nationalist symbols and religious iconography in counter-hegemonic protests. As I show, through this visual discourse AUR promoted its platform and formulated counter-hegemonic narratives directed against democratic institutions and conventions during the health crisis. Theoretically, it is my hope that this article will contribute to the literature on anthropological theories of social change and the growing body of protest movements from EE and Romania (Abăseacă 2018; Gubernat and Rammelt 2021; Vesalon and Creţan 2015; Chiruta 2020; Adi and Lilleker 2017). I begin with a short overview of the literature on rituals of rebellions and ceremonial revolution, followed by an outline of a theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Then a concise profile of AUR's ideological shift to the far-right is provided. Following this, the study presents its methodology and concludes by showcasing its main findings and inferences.

RITUALS, CEREMONIAL REVOLUTION, AND COUNTER-HEGEMONY IN DISCOURSES

In "Rituals of Rebellion" (1954) Max Gluckman argued that demonstrations often rely on ritualised repertoires, with some expressing hostility towards the *status quo*, albeit in a veiled form. Influenced by Marxist theory and Freudian psychoanalysis, Gluckman's work conjectured that the *modus operandi* of demonstrations is usually carried by individuals who embark on an "arduous journey" (1954, 16). These agents challenge the *status quo* of power holders and governments through ritualised processes to establish "social order" in previously unchallenged systems. Here, "participants openly challenge authority and dispute particular distributions of power, but not the structure of the system itself" (Aronoff and Kubik 2013, 91).

Despite articulating the beneficial effects that will ensue for the social order, the purpose of those challenging unobstructed power is "to acquire the same position of authority for themselves" (Gluckman 1954, 21), deploying new ritualistic performances to achieve their desired aim. Although some have disagreed with the theory of ritualized protests in modern societies (cf. Apter 1983; Schroter 2003), I agree with Gluckman's concept, as its epistemological position logically trails the dimension with which specific rituals challenge some principles of the social and political order. This is also the paradigm for this case study, albeit with one caveat. Following Aronoff and Kubik's (2013, 92) argument that rituals still take place in modern societies, I contend that the framework of modern rituals is not intended to abolish the entire social order but to redesign it to benefit the performers. This is done by challenging the legitimacy of the powers that be.

Thus, from Gluckman's theory stems the idea of "ceremonial revolutions" (Kubik 1994). These are employed by agents who disagree with the social and political order

and seek to challenge and redesign it through new legitimized means such as protests. These agents stage their "revolutionary" performances in specific spaces where power can be contested. They supplement the revolutionary performances with well-crafted imagery and messages that deliver a counter-hegemonic discourse. I contend that AUR's early demonstrations and rhetoric can be interpreted as belonging to the Gramscian sphere of counter-hegemony. Kubik contends that "counterhegemonic discourses break into public spaces with vigour and high visibility, thereby challenging the [hegemony]" (1994, 12) and proposes an original set of tools to investigate political mobilisation in Central and Eastern Europe, "which offers an important laboratory to study radical right mobilisation strategies" (Bustikova 2019, 3–4).

The research has shown the utility of incorporating the concept of counter-hegemony in social media analyses of protests movements (Navumau 2019), newspaper content analyses of grassroots movements (De Cillia and McCurdy 2020) and the transnational discourses of far-right parties in Europe on ethnic issues (Balci and Cicioglu 2020). When investigating power contestation in Romania, several studies reveal a rich tradition of voices of discontent (Burean and Badescu 2014), anti-government mobilisation in times of crisis (Abăseacă 2018) and cases where Western hegemonic discourse has been utilised to frame national discontent (Gubernat and Rammelt 2021). To link this study with the above research, I interconnect Kubik's work on counter-hegemony with Laclau's theorisation of discourse. The latter is theorised as a construction of social meaning through the logic of polarisation that ultimately constitutes the "other" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 94–95). The reason for this is that Kubik's conceptual framework of counter-hegemony, when adapted to far-right discourses, can be used to interpret a set of polarising statements, through which influential agents claim legitimacy and construct authority (1994, 47).

Some neo-Gramscian scholars contend that counter-hegemony is successful when those who oppose the power holders articulate a fully-fledged alternative hegemonic vision (Pratt 2004). I do not share the view that counter-hegemonic discourses are effective only when various points of articulation are integrated into coherent strategic forms (Carroll 2006). Instead, I argue that the strategic *modus operandi* of far-right populist groups and actors is to employ diverse points of articulation similar to what Kubik calls "direct exercises of power" (1994, 47) and show that counter-hegemony is achieved through diverse actions, employed at all stages of right-wing populist mobilisations, as these groups seek to inject emotionality into politics and exploit crises through symbolic performances that hook audiences. Following Kubik's interpretation of rituals as ceremonial revolutions (2013, 100–102), this paper contends that two exercises take place herein: a) *performance enacting the symbolic reversal of power*; b) *performance constituting a rehearsal for the actual challenge of power*.

AUR – A SHORT PORTRAIT OF A FAR-RIGHT PARTY

This paper focuses on AUR and its deployment of counter-hegemonic narratives during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most populist parties or agents who emerge as counter-hegemonic are not openly radical because they need to appeal to broader audiences through their contestation of power. They may later swing towards extremism, depending on how successful they are in persuading people to their worldview and how much opposition they receive from mainstream parties, civil society, and the media. But initially these parties rely on constructing counter-hegemony through a time-consuming moderate strategy to coax audiences to approve anti-hegemony viewpoints, in what Gramsci calls an "educational relationship" (2011, 157). Such a relatively toned-down attempt to establish counter-hegemony increases AUR's chances of being accepted by a broader audience and enhances its trajectory towards becoming mainstream.

Palonen and Sunnercrantz (2021, 153) argue that "populist parties are challengers of the status quo who seek to offer a new alternative vision, question or basis of argumentation for a political 'us'". Right-wing populist parties who later swing towards extremism begin by linking people's own understandings of culture and tradition with their own emerging ideologies that oppose the hegemony of established policies or discourses. Research has shown that populist actors instrumentalise folklore, popular culture and traditional identities for differently than the champions of existing hegemony (Custodi 2021; Caiani and Padoan 2020).

AUR has effectively derailed several governmental policies, such as the vaccine mandate, through demonstrations that have utilised popular culture and traditions and replicated the *modus operandi* of other transnational movements from the US, Germany, and Canada. Some may argue that AUR's later *modus operandi* borders on the alt-right, which is defined as "a set of far-right ideologies adopted by groups of individuals who believe that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces" (Mudde 2019,26 quoting the Southern Poverty Law Center). If we replace "white" with "Romanianness", the party may be viewed as alt-right.

Nevertheless, I disagree, as AUR is a young party lacking tradition, ideological consistency, and both national and pan-European political support. AUR is building political clout by opposing hegemony and attempting to persuade audiences to embrace its viewpoints, thereby hoping to become a mainstream party. Though AUR emerged as a populist right-wing party and shifted towards the far-right in late 2021, the party has recently scaled down its extremism following opinion polls suggesting that the electorate has moved back to the mainstream in the wake of the Ukrainian-Russian war (Mihailescu 2022). AUR's early strategy during Covid-19 was embedded in counter-hegemony, as it sought to instrumentalise people's fears *vis-à-vis* the virus and vaccine. AUR's aim during Covid-19 was to reinvigorate people's opposition to hegemonic power by testing different discursive and demonstration strategies to determine the salience

of its ideas. The party's performances have largely been demonstrations organised to increase its notoriety and as a way of seeking validation from the public on the new rhetoric as challenging parties often do. To better understand the development of AUR's protests, this study describes the evolution of the party through the prism of brand positioning, i.e., increasing social media visibility and reachability, partnering with notorious personalities with wider reach and obtaining endorsement from the clergy. AUR is a far-right party with two main factions. One is the radical camp of George Simion, a former football ultra-turned charismatic politician with 1.2 million followers and growing on Facebook, responsible for protest supervision and on-the ground coverage. Claudiu Tîrziu (12,000 followers – former journalist) and Sorin Lavric (intellectual, writer) lead the second. These are AUR's ideologues, who seldom seek media limelight. Before the war on Ukraine started on 24th February, these two camps were in competition for AUR's presidency, eventually won by Simion, who in doing so was forced to mitigate his camp's tilt to extremism and accommodate Tîrziu's demands to move AUR to the mainstream before the 2024 parliamentary elections (Tapalaga 2022). However, before this competition, AUR adopted a series of strategies and rhetoric that increased its notoriety in 2021.

Following its electoral success in 2020, the party revamped its platform to appeal to a wider audience. First, AUR's protests in parliament were combined with the strong media presence of its leaders during prime-time TV shows such as "*Sinteza Zilei"* (Synthesis of the Day) from Antena 3 and "*Punctul Culminant"* (Climax) from Romania TV. These are news channels known for featuring populists, antagonistic politicians, and conspiracy purveyors, and for appealing to a specific sector of the electorate. Second, AUR carefully instrumentalised verbal and physical violence and deployed them against "corrupt political actors and groups".

In terms of layering, AUR expanded its reach in the media. It made sure that its populist rhetoric was consistent with the idea that "legitimacy is located with the people" (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Engesser et al. 2017). AUR focused on providing a consistent narrative stream that suggested corruption among the mainstream parties. Although the party's social media influence was substantial earlier, its reach increased in the next period. It did so by consistently utilising videos of daily proceedings from parliament and feeding "echo chambers" with cross-ideological discussions about corruption. The instrumentalisation of "echo chambers" aided the party's rise to prominence and nurtured the popularity of its leaders on social media (Despa and Albu 2021).

As a result of this, AUR's grievances were assured of reaching a wider audience whose interpretation of information is not contradicted or diluted by mainstream information. Studies argue that "populism is reactively constructed against established truths" (Doiciar and Creţan 2021, 245). I agree with the above assertion, as others have shown that these chambers "isolate audiences from the truth" (Waisbord 2018; Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, and Bimber 2020). In these settings, extreme parties combine economic and

political grievances with xenophobic discourses and supply these to their lower-class targeted audiences (Khosravinik 2017). As Boulianne et al. (2020, 684) contend, "echo chambers can be formed in reaction to feelings of being attacked, a perspective that populist leaders tend to perpetuate". For example, in early 2022, AUR railed against the media for its reporting on the party and compiled a "blacklist" on Facebook, inviting its supporters to name "the most toxic and false media" (Pantazi 2022).

AUR has been an effective user of new social media, but to enhance its visibility it has also affiliated its name with such personalities as Călin Georgescu, AUR's former honorary president and supporter of the fascist Legionary Movement (for more on this movement see Endresen 2012) and Dan Puric, an actor and promoter of "spiritualism", who added weight to their discursive repertoires during demonstrations. As Doiciar and Cretan (2021, 246–47) have argued, "AUR's success in recruiting well-known and highly recognisable personalities to its cause has led to something approaching 'celebrity political war'". Hence, associating notorious personalities with the AUR "brand" helped to validate them in the eyes of the electorate.

However, by far the greatest of its associations is the indirect support it has received from influential members of the Orthodox Church, who share AUR's viewpoints on abortion, homophobia, exclusion of sex education in schools, and Christian fundamentalism. AUR crusaded against restrictions by endorsing the rights of churches to receive their parishioners during festivities (Reman 2020). AUR listed the Christian faith as the first core value in its political manifesto, emphasized by the Latin axiom – *Nihil sine Deo*/Nothing without God. Naturally, this captured the attention of some radical bishops such as the Archbishop of Constanta, Teodosie, who has endorsed AUR's rhetoric. An analysis of AUR collaborators shows a robust association between the party, clergypersons and other far-right movements when commemorating the Iron Guard days (Marincea 2022). Research has shown that traditionalist priests supported AUR, as they felt disillusioned with mainstream parties for abandoning the Church and its values, and for adopting EU values instead (Gherghina and Mișcoiu 2022). After gradually acquiring the support of well-known personalities and increasing its domestic reach, AUR's leaders proceeded to counter hegemony.

METHODOLOGY

This paper investigates how AUR has countered hegemony. The dataset used incorporates the imagery, texts, messages, and visuals of approximately 30 protests in 2021–2022 that were collected and assembled into a coherent narrative via digital ethnography. The data was collected after the party entered parliament. To provide reliable empirical results, this study intersected visual analysis to examine the counter-hegemonic discourses used during the protests. Grounded in Kubik's methodological framework

of semiotic analysis (1994), this study conducted analyses on AUR's protests against restrictions and vaccines in 2021–2022. The strength of these combined methods offers an in-depth and rich perspective of the far-right's usage of ceremony to fragment government authority and mobilise the electorate.

The study is not based on formal or informal interviews with AUR members or supporters. Instead, it relies on a time-consuming analysis of approximately 12 hours of footage of protests, marches, and demonstrations, with carefully organised material from different social media channels (such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube). Media reporting and footage from G4Media, ProTV, and Spotmedia (independent media) were also consulted to provide a reliable analysis where missing elements were detected.

The analysis supports my main claim that the iconography employed by AUR during protests is consistent with what Kubik called ceremonial revolution, waged in this case against the authorities' decisions to restrict people's movements. The analysis also reveals that the performative acts of AUR's protests instrumentalised the symbolism of the anti-communist revolution when challenging the *status quo*.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Many macro and microelements can determine the shape of far-right protests. From the number of people involved to the settings cherrypicked by the actors, to the strategy which agents choose for their interactions and communication of their demands, far-right protests are socio-political settings in which acting and creating a powerful impression are the ultimate goals. There are many aesthetic and cultural differences between performances of far-right groups. Most concern their countries' socio-political and cultural milieu. However, all manifestations have one thing in common: they target something or someone. Studies have highlighted the role played by tactics and performativity among right-wing social movements and far-right demonstrations (De Cillia and McCurdy 2020; Daphi et al. 2021; Goldstein 2019). Therefore, I have looked specifically at the performative style used by AUR in 2021–2022 to create a counterhegemonic discourse. But first, I need to describe the hegemonic narratives of the established power which AUR has challenged.

Covid-19 measures: The hegemonic policy that catapulted AUR in polls and election

The Romanian government, a carrier of the hegemonic power in the country, began drafting bills in 2021 to contain the pandemic and reduce pressure on the frail health system. The proposed restrictions, expressed and framed by hegemonic discourses, were imposed to reduce social mobility, mandate masks, revamp the vaccination campaign

and, most importantly, enforce the green certificate at work, which involved a digital proof that verified vaccination status and permitted mobility.

As the vaccination campaign improved, the government began a public relations campaign to increase the vaccination rate. Often the government made sure that vaccine shipments, the collective plan of the EU and World Health Organisation's recommendations were given ample media coverage. Simultaneously, Facebook became a fertile setting for disseminating misinformation and conspiracy narratives related to vaccines (Simina 2021; Bambu 2021).

As the government adopted new restrictions, the number of inoculations increased to almost 70,000 per day in late March and April (Digi24 2021). As vaccinations increased, so did the public outcry against vaccination. Eventually, by May 2021, the government had lifted most of the measures as a result of public and political pressure and opened the economy during the summer to boost profits in the hospitality sector. It seems that each of the government's actions was met by AUR counteractions that mitigated their effects.

In September, the number of infections and mortality rate rose severely. By October, Romania had the second-highest mortality rate in the EU after Bulgaria, with 15,000 infections and around 400 fatalities on average per day (Dascalu et al. 2021). Eventually, the government reintroduced some of its earlier measures and augmented its public relations campaign (Chirileasa 2021). As the number of cases climbed, the government considered closing some places of worship, eventually settling on banning inter-county/district mobility. Additionally, new bills were enacted which permitted the police to fine people who disregarded the safety measures.

Nevertheless, the hospitalisation rate increased, and Romanian healthcare almost collapsed. Health workers from Poland, Israel, Hungary, and Czechia assisted their Romanian counterparts through the EU's civil protection mechanism (Martuscelli 2021). Despite this, the number of infections continued to increase, and the mortality rate remained high. Given this state of affairs, the government began formal talks to enforce the green certificate. Eventually, the bill was abandoned as legislators began receiving threatening texts on their phones saying, "Don't vote for the certificate. Do and we'll set you on fire" from AUR's MPs (Despa 2021). On 21st December, hundreds of AUR supporters stormed the parliament gates to prevent the bill from passing. What led to this moment and how AUR countered the hegemony beforehand will now be examined.

Performance of the symbolic reversal of power

AUR's success is attributed to George Simion, who has constantly grabbed the media's attention. Not all the demonstrations documented here were organized by AUR, as other radical groups have demonstrated on their own or associated themselves with AUR's protests to increase their visibility. Simion's organizational skills became the main

selling point of the party on Facebook, where he often participated in live streams. In 2021–2022, Simion managed to reach 1.2 million people on Facebook (Andrei 2022). According to some independent media, AUR's online behaviour has been highly organised. Dissemination of information is coordinated by the Moldovan, Diana Grosu, who supports AUR's unionist platform (union with Moldova), under a "factory of content" that produces hyperbolised and deceptive videos or Facebook posts (Rise Project 2021). These new platforms have allowed Simion to have direct links with his audience and provide alternative information in echo chambers (Despa and Albu 2021). Similar behaviour was observed in other studies on Romanian right-wing parties (Gherghina and Miscoiu 2014; Norocel and Szabó 2019). Focused on challenging the hegemonic views on vaccines and restrictions, Simion and other AUR members have offered an online narrative organized around the concepts of "freedom" and "constitutionality", which have echoed in the streets.

Populist agents often present themselves as guardians of democratic ideals in their discourses (Chiruta 2021). In AUR's case, the demonstrations promoted several messages focused on "freedom" in opposition to restrictions and vaccines. Herein, AUR invoked the socio-cultural background of Romania to associate restrictions with Romania's turbulent political past (such as communism). Communism was instrumentalised in a discourse designed to instil in people's minds the idea that is was what Gluckman (1954, 16) called a "vessel of symbolizing the past". By doing so, AUR's discourse established a "chain of equivalence" (Laclau 2005) between the antagonism experienced during communism and the present. Espoused on social media and later promoted in public squares, AUR's views on "freedom" and "tyranny" suggested a logical and negative connection between the past and present governmental measures. By fashioning its performances' intended meaning in this manner, AUR positioned itself as a protector of "freedom" against any hegemonic discourses.

For example, in the parliament AUR displayed banners with counter-hegemonic inscriptions: "*Libertate fără certificate* / Freedom without certificates". By doing so, it was contesting the power of the government and promoting populist narratives of "acting in the interest of Romanians". In one of his Facebook posts, Simion opined "These governments are not worthy of Romania. For our freedom, for our country, we continue" and invited people to stand up for their rights in the street.

It seems that this specific counter-hegemonic discourse was replicated by AUR followers. Before any demonstrations even started, AUR seemed to have set the stage for protests by displaying slogans and banners in public institutions and conveying them via Facebook live streams. Shortly thereafter, the same themes, colours, and format were replicated during the demonstrations. Much like the performances of football ultra-groups, these slogans were meant to produce a societal reaction. AUR supporters adhered to the same stylistic format on their banners but added new elements to accentuate the negative context posed by the green certificate.

By organizing their ceremonial revolutions in this orchestrated fashion, AUR's counter-hegemonic discourse seemed to "exercise power" (Kubik 1994, 47). The main themes of the "*Libertate fără certificate* / Freedom without certificate" demonstrations were collective chants that resembled previous anti-corruption slogans in 2017–2019, when hegemony was also contested, albeit for different reasons. AUR's intention is probably not to expand its reach but to contest the social order for its own benefits, by tapping into the tradition of contesting parties in power.

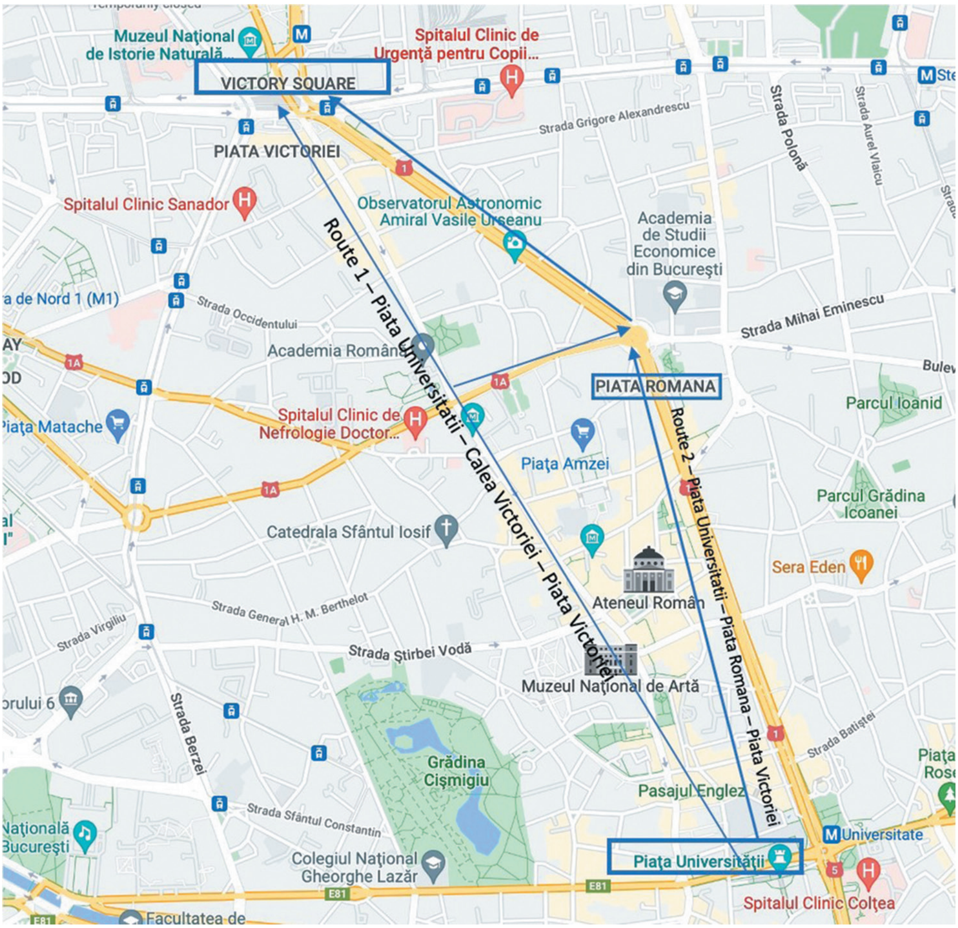
As shown in other studies (Chiruta 2020), the theme of freedom is also used by political agents who have demonstrated against the judiciary. The chants used during AUR's protests also resembled those in 2017–2019. Moreover, the "Get out of the house; it's your country, too" was used in previous demonstrations in 2017 (Adi and Lilleker 2017). AUR seems to build on the tradition of contesting hegemony in Romania through protest and associate its image with people's contestation of power. This finding suggests that AUR instrumentalised popular chants and collective memory against authority in their ceremonies to mobilise people. This is in line with research on social movements in Romania and the existence of activism rooted in the local and national context (Abăseacă 2018). As long as corruption and mismanagement are brought up in public performances, the heightened level of social mobilization is maintained. AUR discourses seem to instrumentalize this contestation for its own benefit, by associating people's dissatisfaction with its own political platform.

Ceremonial spaces

The symbolism of space where protests occur should be meaningful for the participants and audiences who are expected to engage with protest discourses (Kubik 1994, 50–51). AUR seems to suggest associations between locations, history, and the current context and their discursive platform, by utilizing such spaces as Piața Victoriei and Universității. The former is a square in front of the government building, and both are hard-wired into Romanian consciousness as spaces where the anti-communist revolution took place.

Other studies (Chiruta 2020) have investigated the use of Piața Victoriei for anti-judiciary protests by populist actors. Unlike them, AUR protests seem to be ceremonies that validate the symbolic affiliation of the square in Romanian consciousness and associate it with AUR's discursive purpose. AUR ceremonies look to incorporate what Kubik sees as "cultural forms" (1994, 12). The protesters, whose actions are often popularised by AUR's Simion on social media. usually march across Calea Victoriei, a major avenue in the centre of București where many state institutions and historic monuments are located. At other times, the demonstrations have changed route and moved alongside Piața Romană to protest in front of foreign embassies. While traversing the boulevard dressed in national costumes or in dark attire and holding Romanian revolutionary flags, AUR's marches stop at Piața Victoriei, where many precepts of the official, hegemonic discourse are contested. The AUR protests use emotional slogans

such as “I believe in God, not in Covid-19” or “Your tyranny is awakening Romania” that are very much opposed to the abstract nature of the hegemonic discourses. People can relate to them and easily understand their meaning. Other times, the meaning of freedom is articulated in catchphrases such as “On the streets for truth and freedom” or “Freedom, we love you. We either win or die” that resemble 1989 rhetoric and suggest that the hegemonic discourse is not sufficiently focused on people’s freedom. Similar deconstructive intentions have been observed in other studies on social protests in Romania (Adi and Lilleker 2017; Vesalon and Creţan 2015).



Map 1. The routes of AUR’s marches documented in București. These usually start at Piața Universitatii (University Square) and traverse Calea Victoriei up north to the Piața Victoriei (Victory Square). Sometimes, AUR’s marches detoured towards Piața Romana (Roman Square). Source: Google maps amended by Author, based on fieldwork results

Additionally, what seems unique to AUR ceremonies is the attention the leaders such as Simion give on Facebook to historical events, including for example the victorious campaigns of 1878, when the Romanian army defeated the Ottoman forces (another hegemonic trope) or the massive demonstrations of the 1989 Revolution, when Nicolae Ceaușescu was ousted. Simion seems to link the past and present seamlessly in the AUR discourse. This effect is enhanced by the choice of attire by the demonstrators and the decorations of the events. The participants and Simion himself wear traditional Romanian costumes and always display religious paraphernalia.

The ceremonial processions move along the boulevards from one square to another, as in religious proceedings, accompanied by thumps and whistles, paying homage by bowing and making the sign of the Orthodox cross in historic spaces associated with the 1989 Revolution and its victims. By doing so, AUR incorporates the symbolism of the Revolution within its demonstrations, thereby hoping to attract people to its cause and openly challenge the authorities. Though the routes change, the marches seem to always pass by public institutions such as government and ministerial buildings or the presidential residence (Palatul Cotroceni), as these are adjacent to large *piazzas* and suitable for performing open challenges to power. As in the case of Polish anti-communist demonstrations Kubik described, "counter-hegemonic discourses break into public spaces with vigour and high visibility" (1994, 12). In fact, AUR demonstrations aim for maximum visibility. The goal is to contest the hegemonic discourse justifying anti-Covid-19 measures and capture both media attention and the public's imagination with choreographed ceremonial performances.

Marching is an important component in far-right demonstrations (Volk 2020). By moving from one symbolically saturated space to another, the demonstrations reconstruct the story of the Revolution. By associating their name with the squares in question, AUR recreates the revolutionary story in the present and seeks validation for its authority. The paraphernalia used by marchers, such as the holed-carved flag, have incorporated the symbols of the 1989 Revolution. Their incorporation into AUR's imagery connects them to the revolutionary role that this far-right party has ascribed to itself during the pandemic. After September 2021, AUR replaced the 1989 Revolution flag with its redrafted version, which included religious iconography. Moreover, the hegemonic culture associated with the authorities is contested in *piazzas* by ignoring the official night curfews and all of this is done in front of a particularly central symbol of power: the government building. Simona Șoșoacă, a now-former radical AUR member, gave speeches in such spots dressed in the national costume, with a Romanian flag draped around her waist.

These sorts of ceremonies are instantly broadcasted via social media, where countless people can be seen live streaming the speech. Such behaviour arguably favours the AUR "content factory". As revealed by journalists, the activities of this factory are carefully orchestrated by Diana Grosu and then shared on the numerous pages dedicated to

the leaders of AUR or of the party (Rise Project 2021). By doing so, AUR establishes direct communication with its followers, bypassing the unwanted mediation of the mainstream media. Consequently, these ceremonies may have solidified the legitimacy of AUR in the eyes of disgruntled people whose unaddressed concerns regarding vaccination made them emotionally vulnerable to the far-right's "exercise of power". To increase the potency of their counter-hegemonic discourse, AUR has co-opted tradition and signs whose meaning can be easily decoded by the public.

The reintroduction of tradition and religious values

The counter-hegemonic narratives that oppose hegemonic discourses are anchored in a mixture of traditionalist, religious and occult values that deconstruct the validity of science, vaccines made possible by it, and the whole project of modernity. On 3rd October 2021, AUR organized its largest demonstration to this point by, mobilizing 15,000 supporters from all corners of Romania. During this rally, new challenges to the hegemonic discourse appeared, as the previously utilised décor of such events was modified.

For example, AUR encouraged its supporters on social media to present themselves as representatives of the nation that opposes the "corrupt elites" who take away Romanians' liberty. By framing the action this way, AUR wanted to highlight the organic concept of Romanianness conveyed in symbols that embody traditional and religious values and express opposition to the foreignness of the vaccine. Following Bieber's definition of nationalism (2020a, 10), AUR likely desired to "protect the nation" from the invasiveness of the foreign vaccine. Likewise, much of its discourse was focused on underlining the "unholiness" of the vaccines and the measures imposed by the government. By doing so, AUR instrumentalised the religious power of Orthodox Christianity against the vaccine. It also called for a Romanian anti-Covid vaccine (Doiciar and Creţan 2021).

A noticeable feature of the demonstrations was the intertwining of traditional values with religion in an effort to reject the hegemonic discourse. For instance, one could see people dressed in national costumes, wearing an AUR ribbon attached to their coats and holding both an AUR redesigned Romanian flag and a picture of some saint and/or an inscription containg a fragment of the Bible. Such a costume is similar to the traditional attire AUR members wear during religious festivities and protests, which, in turn, replicates the way of dressing by the members of the Legionary Movement and its leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a pro-Nazi, far right political formation active during the interwar period. AUR leaders want to instil in people the image of themselves as stemming directly from the people, a symbolic move replicating the Legionary model from the 1930s.



Picture 1. Iconography used by AUR's supporters at the October and November rallies. The icon represents Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, a beloved and sacred image in the Romanian consciousness. The second is a ribbon whose contours showcase the Romanian flag. It was handed by AUR and the NGO "Action for the Nation" to the people participating at the rallies. Source: G4Media, with permission.



Picture 2. Traditional bear costume brought by AUR's supporters from the northern Romania at the October rallies. Source: G4Media, with permission.

The October demonstration organised by AUR included also other themes incorporated from traditional folklore. Picture 2 shows the traditional bear costume worn by Romanians before the night of New Year's Eve (30th December), when groups of bear-masked individuals chant at every household to drive away bad spirits. Aside from this, AUR's supporters used religious iconography to juxtapose the essence of Romanianness to the foreignness of the vaccine.

Another unique feature of AUR's contestation of the vaccines is its mixing of occultism with religion. In October 2021, during its largest rally, AUR supporters blended Orthodox symbols with occult beliefs in displaying messages about the god Zamolxis, "the teacher of Europe". Zamolxis was an ancient Dacian god, re-popularized in films and literature during the Ceaușescu regime, glorifying the regime's obsession with sovereignty and nationalism. Zamolxis figures prominently in narratives extolling health benefits and mystical energies found under the Carpathian Mountains, which are highly popularised on Facebook nowadays (Nahoi 2021). Thus, by opposing the vaccines, the protesters were simultaneously delegitimizing science, replacing it with traditional and occult beliefs. Opposition to vaccines, science, and modern technology seems to be a central feature of the discourse espoused during most AUR demonstrations. Similar symbolic behaviour has been observed during other social protests that challenged the technology and neo-liberal privatisation of fracking in Romania (Vesalon and Crețan 2015).

Rehearsal for the actual challenge of power or a counter-hegemonic ceremonial revolution?

As shown above, AUR marches are the focal point of their performative repertoire, permeated by religious and national symbols. While some demonstrations have made use of the 1989 Revolution flag, AUR's novel design combines the Christian Orthodox cross with the Romanian flag. The representation of the cross on the national flag circled by the words "Family, Freedom, Faith, Nation" is intended to signal opposition to the hegemonic discourse and the values it represents, as AUR rhetoric wishes to communicate that the restrictions are against the interests of the people. AUR is heavily invested in showing religiosity of the Romanian public in their demonstrations. This is a safe strategy as according to an opinion poll, the Orthodox Church enjoys a much higher level trust among the populace than the government (G4Media 2021).

AUR's incorporation of religious symbols in its performances seems to be intended to contrast the *status quo* and counter-hegemonic values. As Kubik (1994, 50) argues, "[agents] can remodel the nation's traditional symbolic universe by destroying key symbols and substituting new ones". In AUR's case, the symbol of power, which is associated with taking away people's freedom, is counterweighted by a combination of religious and mystical symbols.

"*Vakcin Macht Frei*" slogan was also used alongside revolutionary flags during AUR demonstrations. Bearing a striking resemblance to the infamous Auschwitz inscription, the sign represents a powerful statement of AUR's ideological shift to the far-right. In

late 2021 and early 2022, some of AUR members' rhetoric embraced antisemitism to enlarge its electoral pool, and the party started opposing the teaching of the Holocaust in schools and minimizing the scope of crimes against Jews by Romanian interwar governments (Vulcan 2022). In October-December 2021, the slogan was displayed several times alongside the image of a pig saying, "Democracy is a lie". Its intended message is simple: there is a parallel between the policies of the Nazi regime in Germany and the current Romanian authorities. The sign substituted "*Arbeit*" (work), with "*Vakcin*" (vaccine) to suggests the same deadly lie behind both policies. In December, AUR supporters painted svastikas on the EU flag, while others wrote "Stop communism, stop fascism, stop the Nazi-pass (green certificate)" on banners.

On 21st December 2021, 1,500 supporters of AUR and other far-right groups marched across Calea Victoriei and stormed the gates of the parliament building, vandalising several cars belonging to foreign embassies. AUR sympathizers first jumped over parliament's perimeter wall and then pushed the security personnel protecting the building inside. During this violent rally, the redesigned flag and pro-freedom slogan were observed as the most striking visual symbols of the ceremonial revolution. AUR's storming of the parliament seems to parallel the *modus operandi* of the January 6th Insurrection in the USA. In early 2022, AUR tried unsuccessfully, to replicate the Canadian truckers protests and block transportation in Bucharest.



Picture 3. The march of AUR's supporters in December 2021. The supporters display the image of the second World War Marshall Ion Antonescu (a contested figure in Romania) alongside messages against paedophilia, masonry, corrupt government, and same sex marriages. Source G4Media, with permission.



Picture 4. AUR's supporters are storming the gate of the parliament and fight the gendarmes assigned to protect the institution. Source G4Media, with permission.

Many of these events bear a striking similarity. In all of them, people attempt to challenge the rules of the democratic process, with which they disagree. Further analysis has revealed that most ultra-conservative groups which supported AUR in 2021 joined the storming of parliament. The Orthodox Brotherhood and the New Right members were the most prominent among them. The call for action was justified by fears that the proceedings from parliament would affect people's freedom and deprive them of their constitutional rights; therefore, it was their duty to stop the vote. As argued by Mudde (2019), in its conceptualization of far-right ideology, AUR's sympathizers confirmed the party's strong ideological shift to the fringes of the right. They engaged in violence against government institutions to draw the media's attention to their ideas.

Again, the counter-hegemonic discourse was strengthened by combining religious and national symbols. The ceremonial revolution of 21st December represented the strongest counter-hegemonic statement to the social order since the downfall of communism. With this, AUR supporters upgraded their ritualistic protests to what Kubik (1994) refers to as "revolutionary ceremonies". Through the medium of violence and intense utilization of both religious and national symbols, the protestors rejected the existing rules of the democratic system promoted by the government. As with other far-right protests, the 21st December's storming of the parliament was heavily symbolic.

Again, AUR incorporated symbolism associated with the traumatic past into their projected image by choosing to storm the parliament at a time when Romanians were commemorating the communist revolution and the martyrs who died for democracy and freedom.

By choosing this date, AUR highjacked the commemoration and announced its transition to the extreme far-right position. The symbols AUR incorporated in 2021 became the battle cries as the party contested power. A similarly violent action was repeated in 2022 when AUR supporters led by Simion stormed the mayoral office in Timisoara. AUR gambled with their legitimacy, but they succeeded, as the certificate never came to pass, indicating that AUR's counter-hegemonic discourse and activities were successful in contesting the *status quo*.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the development of counter-hegemonic discourses infused with tradition, religion and occultism that target not only the ruling parties but also liberal ideals and values. AUR came about as a reaction to the failure of the referendum spearheaded by the Coalition for Family, before gradually emerging as both a party and collective movement. Then, after a fight against the legalization of same-sex marriage, it engaged in campaigning against vaccines and restrictions, while preserving its critical stance on (neo)-liberalism. As the party's popularity increased following its electoral success, the counter-hegemonic discourse it espoused started getting traction. AUR used emotionally charged symbols to challenge more abstract hegemonic discourses justifying vaccinations and restrictions. It was also successful in showing that ordinary people's concerns must take centre stage. This was accomplished by performing nationhood as intricately intertwined with Orthodox religion, while simultaneously projecting the party's image as a crusader protecting democratic and conservative values. Moreover, by using the symbolism of past traumatic events, AUR positioned itself as a champion of "the people" opposed "corrupt elites".

I also examine AUR as a far-right party that uses protest, sometimes violent, to disseminate its political narratives and provide further evidence that Romanian social movements have often returned to symbols of the past to construct their vision of the nation's collective memory and to frame people's fears in times of crisis (Abăseacă 2018; Vesalon and Creţan 2015). For AUR and other far right parties, formulating and disseminating counter-hegemonic visions seems to be a long-term strategy, skilfully used to build momentum particularly when people experienced crises. In my analysis of AUR's discourse I used Kubik's (1994; 2013) concept of ceremonial revolutions, Gramsci's (2011) idea of counter-hegemony, and Laclau's (2001) reflections on the link between populism and discourse. Here, I have investigated whether AUR's

demonstrations aimed at challenging the official anti-Covid restrictions amounted to a ceremonial revolution that successfully articulated counter-hegemonic visions of the society and polity and concluded that they did.

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